



# THE SUNDAY TIMES

## Alpha Males Can Make and Break a Business

BY DOMINIC RUSHE IN NEW YORK

**T**estosterone-fuelled leaders may be brilliant, but they can also alienate staff and wreck strategic thinking, says a new book

AT the age of 19, Michael Dell told his grandmother that the company he had just founded in his college dorm room was going to be “bigger than IBM.”

Soon after, the business was grossing \$80,000, and by 2001 Dell was the world’s No.1 in the personal-computer market. Today, Dell, 41, is worth \$16 billion (£8.4 billion), according to Forbes magazine.

An “alpha male” was made.

Testosterone-charged, hyperachieving alpha males like Dell are the masters of the business universe; the kings of the corporate jungle.

And they make up 75% of the world’s top executives, according to *Alpha Male Syndrome*, a new book on the breed to be published by Harvard Business School Press next month.

“Human history is the story of alphas, those indispensable powerhouses who take charge, conquer new worlds, and move heaven and earth to make things happen,” write the book’s authors, Kate Ludeman and Eddie Erlandson.

They are a husband-and-wife executive-coaching team who have worked with more than 1,500 senior executives, including Dell, his chief executive, Kevin Rollins, and eBay’s chief executive Meg Whitman.

As the title of their book implies, they contend that the mighty alpha male may muscle his way to the top but once there often casts a large shadow. When alpha males go off the rails they create “corporate soap operas” more appropriate to an episode of *The Office* than management textbooks. For Michael Dell, substitute David Brent.

And when these titans fall, their companies often collapse with them.

Many of the problems with rogue alpha males stem directly from their most positive attributes. Persistent people become stubborn; brilliant analysts think themselves into a corner; the unflinchingly self-confident lose the ability to listen.

Ludeman said she worked with one chief executive who was “completely obnoxious. He never listened to anyone and constantly interrupted people before telling them what to do.”

She convinced him to listen to people for three months. “I told him it doesn’t matter if you listen, ignore their advice and then do exactly what you want. All I want you to do is listen,” she said. Three months later the executive was amazed at the positive feedback he was getting. “It hadn’t occurred to him that people want to be listened to,” she said.

That executive was lucky. Many alpha males, cocooned by their own self-regard, fail to see their problems until it is too late. The strengths that propelled them to the top are often closely allied to the flaws that bring them down.

“Looking back on it, I wasn’t always right. But I was never in doubt,” one high-tech entrepreneur who lost investors \$20m told the book’s authors.

Rogue alpha males feel that they have to make their mark in the office no matter what the cost. And if it’s not about money, it’s about sex.

“We have observed that many leaders who fit the dysfunctional alpha-male typology fall prey to sexual predation, becoming womanisers who use conquests and control to assert their dominance,” the authors write.

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The worst sort of alpha male believes the laws of the jungle should be applied to the workplace, according to the authors. But it turns out that “the chest-thumping leadership style not only doesn’t cut it in today’s office, it also doesn’t work that well in the jungle,” they write.

Research into baboons by Stanford University primatologist Robert Sapolsky found that the most brutish ones suffered the most stress and were not good at keeping the status they fought so fiercely to obtain. The baboons that got to the top and stayed there were the clever and collaborative ones who survived by forming coalitions.

“Everybody needs some alpha traits to be successful — the drive for results, the ability to inspire people to do more than they thought possible,” said Ludeman.

While lesser mortals can cultivate those aspects, the pure alpha male is born with an abundance of those characteristics. The most successful will adapt to their environment and grow in their position. The problem alphas find is that “what gets you there, does not keep you there,” said Ludeman.

And what of alpha woman? Is there such an animal? According to Ludeman and Erlandson, she does exist but in far fewer numbers; the boardroom, they say, is one arena where the female is less deadly than the male.

Women at the top tend to be less belligerent than their XY-chromosomed counterparts. “Alpha women want to lead, but they don’t necessarily need to rule,” the authors write.

In an interview, Ludeman said that alpha women were “less angry and less impatient” than men. As a result, Ludeman, who has worked with companies including Coca-Cola, Gap, General Electric and Microsoft, said most of her problem clients had been men. In the book she jokes that part of her job is “transforming jerks into nice guys.”

The authors identify four main types of alpha leaders, all with good and bad points.

- **Commanders:** These are intense and magnetic. They push people hard to reach their goals but can end up bulldozing people, are free and loose with the rules and create an atmosphere of fear.
- **Visionaries:** Creative, curious, inspiring, they can see the future. On the downside, they ignore reality, are closed to input and spin the truth.
- **Strategists:** Quick, analytical and objective, they find opportunities others miss. But they can also be smug,

opinionated know-it-alls, lacking in team spirit and unable to admit mistakes.

- **Executors:** Tireless doers with an eye for detail, they are excellent problem-solvers who get the job done. But they can be unreasonable micromangers who burn out employees and are overcritical.

Alpha males may end up playing several roles, and vary from “sweeties who everyone wants to work for to absolute bullies,” said Ludeman.

But even at the nicer end of the scale, alpha males can hide deep-seated faults that are brought out by stress.

Ironically, alpha males often seek out stressful situations or create them artificially in order to get their adrenaline going.

Ludeman said *The Apprentice* television show was a prime example of what happens when rogue alphas go bad. The show’s competitors are supposed to work in teams but often work against each other, deliberately creating stress in the hope of seeing off their rivals.

“Alpha males like stress because they like to win. But they don’t necessarily deal very well with it,” said Ludeman. When alphas are under stress their behaviour tends to be at its most problematic.

But there is a serious issue behind the authors’ analysis; and this is that companies run by unhealthy alphas tend to develop real problems. Organisations dominated by dysfunctional alphas often have a higher incidence of illness, absenteeism, burnout, turnover and early retirement than businesses run by healthy alphas and non-alphas.

Intervention is the answer, said Ludeman. For the good of the company — and for himself — the angry alpha needs to get help.

Maybe so. But who is going to tell him?

## Have you the muscle to be an alpha male?

Read each question and give it a score that ranges from 0 for ‘strongly disagree’ to 10 for ‘strongly agree.’

- No matter what, I don’t give up until I reach my goal.
- When I play a game, I like to keep score.
- I sometimes rant and rave when I don’t get my way.
- My opinions and ideas are usually the best ones.

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- When others don't agree, I lose my temper.
- I am accustomed to being the centre of attention.
- People have described me as a 'natural born leader.'
- I believe the end usually justifies the means.
- I only collaborate with peers when I have to.
- There are a lot of people who are just plain stupid.

## HOW DID YOU DO?

0-25 Absolute wimp: keep tissues on your desk

25-50 Bit of a pushover

50-75 Ambitious but afraid to wield the knife

75-100 Kerrang! You're an alpha male

Questions drawn from Alpha Male questionnaire.

To take the full test visit [www.AlphaMaleSyndrome.com](http://www.AlphaMaleSyndrome.com)

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Kate Ludeman, PhD, is CEO and founder of Worth Ethic Corporation and author of *The Corporate Mystic* and four other books. She has been a featured speaker at the Fortune Magazine Summit of the Best and Most Admired Companies and has coached more than 1,000 CEOs and senior executives on every continent.



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